Schooled in Stereotypes

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In our modern-day world, we value education as the key to success. External pressures drive us to pursue higher degrees, top schools, and perfect grades. All of this work is in the hope that academic achievement will open doors to opportunity, status, and financial security. But beyond the pursuit of knowledge, education also shapes how we see ourselves and present our identities to others. In Cord Jefferson's film *American Fiction*, the protagonist Monk's ability to hide his true identity as an educated writer and adopt the persona of a criminal grants him literary success. Similarly, in R. F. Kuang's novel *Yellowface*, the protagonist June's appropriation of an Asian identity as a privileged white woman allows her to escape literary obscurity. By presenting identity manipulation as a tool accessible only to the educated, both texts argue that education grants the additional privilege of recognizing and exploiting stereotypes. Such privilege allows individuals to navigate and pivot their identities for personal gain.

By endowing Monk with the ability to adopt a criminal persona and conceal his true identity as an educated writer, Jefferson reveals how individuals with education can harness identity manipulation by recognizing stereotypes and modeling themselves to fit them. Monk's entire family consists of doctors, and he himself is a college professor with a PhD—both prestigious and high-paying roles that signify education and prowess. Monk, who comes from a privileged and educated background, writes for an erudite audience, such as his previous Greek tragedies. When Monk drastically alters his writing style and publishes a satirical book packed with the most commercialized stereotypes of Black people, his change initially appears as a

one-time act of rebellion; however, as the film progresses, Monk increasingly commits to playing the role of the persona he's created. Monk's awareness of these stereotypes is evident when he quips, "If he wants a stereotype, maybe it's better I'm late" (62). Monk's words portray his conscious recognition of the stereotype that Black people are often late. His education affords Monk the ability to understand cultural dynamics and expectations and enables him to craft a persona that aligns with the market's demands. Monk is fully aware that a book written by "Stagg R. Leigh" —a pseudonym he adopts—will succeed because it caters to what the market wants: stories about stereotypes. Specifically, Monk understands that any book that exaggerates black culture will do well among the main customers of the publishing industry–white audiences. He admits this view when he says his book, "seems written to satisfy the tastes of guilt-ridden white people" (98). Despite mocking himself, Monk acknowledges that he designed his work to fulfill the expectations of a white audience eager to consume stories steeped in stereotypical portrayals of Black people. Having linked Monk's ability to manipulate his identity as a tool granted directly by his educational privilege, Jefferson effectively argues that higher education commodifies success.

Kuang likewise critiques identity manipulation and appropriation as tools available primarily to the educationally privileged. Education enables June to reinvent herself as an ethnic writer, understand market demands, and adapt accordingly. Deep-seated resentment toward Athena, another author who shares her educational accolades but differs in public identity, drives June, a white author, to steal Athena's manuscript. Despite June's previous works having failed commercially, her first significant success comes with Athena's book about Chinese labor camps,

written under the newly adopted pen name “Juniper Song” rather than June Hayward. During a book interview following her newfound fame, June justifies her name change by stating that it “suggest[s] the right credentials” (62). June’s name change highlights her strategic awareness that readers often judge books not only by their content but also by the author’s perceived background. By adopting a pseudonym resembling a Chinese surname, June shifts her image from a highly educated Yale graduate to someone defined by ethnic ambiguity. Her new name offers “credentials” of diversity rather than her more literal credentials of academic achievement. June recognizes that the perception of an author’s identity can influence the reception of their work. Her name change reflects this belief, as she thinks people may trust her book not because of her Yale education, but because she appears Asian. While brainstorming ideas for her next book, June acknowledges a need to voice stories “that white people don’t see on a daily basis” (228). June’s explicit desire to write about topics that contrast with her identity demonstrates her understanding of the market's preference towards the minority story and her eagerness to exploit those stories for success. June’s master’s degree from Yale doesn’t necessarily aid her in literary success through her writing skills, but rather equips her with the ability to recognize and manipulate stereotypes. During a large climax in the novel when June spirals out of control and lashes out at Candace Lee, her former editorial assistant, June shrieks, “You people–I mean, diverse people–you’re all they want” (307). The “they” that June refers to alludes to the publishing industry, which, throughout June’s career, has consistently rewarded “diverse people” while June herself falters. June’s outburst reflects her belief that strategically manipulating identity would lead to greater success than she could achieve as “just” (6) June Hayward. Kuang

uses this moment to critique how educational and societal privileges shape the literary market and contribute to the commodification of diverse experiences.

Both *Yellowface* and *American Fiction* feature characters who use their educational privilege to exploit and conceal marginalized identities for personal gain. Kuang and Jefferson highlight how those with access to higher education are uniquely positioned to achieve success by appropriating these identities. Their works argue that education not only provides opportunities for advancement but also grants the privilege of recognizing and exploiting racial stereotypes. In the end, the actions of Kuang's and Jefferson's characters—Monk's creation of his criminal façade and June's false Asian rebrand—demonstrate that, despite any expressed moral reservations, their education leads them to believe their manipulation is justified. By presenting similar themes across two different media, both authors emphasize higher education's role in perpetuating racial stereotypes and suggest that those with education often feel empowered to diminish or distort identities for their own benefit.

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